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A Brief Look at Creeds as Part of the Apostasy

John W. Welch

John W. Welch, “‘All Their Creeds Were an Abomination’:A Brief Look at Creeds as Part of the Apostasy,” in *Prelude to the Restoration: From Apostasy to the Restored Church*(Provo, UT and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2004), 228–249.

John W. Welch was a professor of law at Brigham Young University and editor-in-chief of BYU Studies *when this was published.*

On October 15, 1843, the Prophet Joseph Smith commented, “I cannot believe in any of the creeds of the different denominations, because they all have some things in them I cannot subscribe to, though all of them have some truth. I want to come up into the presence of God, and learn all things: but the creeds set up stakes, and say, ‘Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further’; which I cannot subscribe to.” While Latter-day Saints gladly and gratefully recognize that all religious creeds contain some truth, the problem is that those formulations of doctrine also contain errors or impose limits that are “incompatible with the gospel’s inclusive commitment to truth and continual revelation.” Such mixing of truth and error is reminiscent of the parable of the wheat and the tares, the Lord’s most salient teaching on the nature of the Apostasy (Matthew 13:24–30, 37–43; JST Matthew 13; D&C 86:1–11). Thus, the creeds themselves, as vessels of mixed qualities, become metaphors or manifestations of the Apostasy itself.

With this observation in mind, let us consider the creeds as part of the Apostasy, as both cause and effect, symptom and result, of the disturbing religious conditions that plagued the mind and spirit of the youthful Joseph Smith, driving him to the silent grove to seek and receive a revealed solution and divine cure for his—and the worlds—lack of wisdom. The accounts of the First Vision help us ascertain

what the Lord communicated to Joseph in 1820 about the creeds and the problems they had created or reflected. We then follow the development of the creeds from the times of the New Testament into the main creeds of early Christianity and finally into the creeds of the Protestant churches in the early nineteenth century.

Using the Accounts of the First Vision as a Guide

In the First Vision, Joseph Smith was plainly told that Christianity had fallen off the path most pleasing to God and that he should join none of its denominations. As he was told (and reports in his 1838/39 account), the main villain in this unfortunate ecclesiastical situation was the creeds. In response to his question "which of all the sects was right," Joseph was instructed by the Lord "that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight" (Joseph Smith-History 1:18–19).

This important disclosure by the Lord to Joseph Smith raises several questions: Which creeds might Jesus have had in mind? How many creeds existed in 1820, and which of those creeds had been adopted by which of the various "sects"? What did those creeds say, and what was it about them that made them so odious? Were they each individually an abomination, or was the problem that all of them together created a single abomination, due to the confusions, divisions, and contentions that they caused? How did the creeds of 1820 relate to the earlier creeds of Christianity, such as the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Symbol of Chalcedon, or the so-called Athanasian Creed? Was there something categorically wrong with these creeds in general, or only with certain creeds in particular?

We can begin to answer these questions about the history of creedalism in Christianity by combining and marshaling all of the information learned by Joseph Smith about this subject, as reported in the various accounts he gave of that seminal revelation. While the 1838/39 account of the First Vision (recorded by James Mulholland from dictation by Joseph Smith) is the only account of the First Vision to mention the "creeds" specifically by using that particular word, most of the Prophet's other surviving accounts of this vision contain equally unambiguous words to the effect that the people and churches of his day had departed from the gospel.

We learn three main things from this body of information: First, the accounts of the First Vision consistently make it clear that the gospel had been preached originally in truth and purity but that the world had strayed from it. Joseph's first account, handwritten in his journal in 1832, reports these words spoken by the

Lord: “The world lieth in sin at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned asside from the gospel and keep not <my> commandments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me.” In 1843 Levi Richards reported that Joseph said that “none of them were right, that they were all wrong, & that the Everlasting covenant was broken.” Joseph’s last known account, recorded by Alexander Neibaur in his 1844 journal, emphasizes this same point: “They are not my People, have gone astray there is none that doeth good no not one, but this is my Beloved son harken ye him.”

Second, in particular, errors of doctrine had been introduced into the beliefs of the people. “They teach for doctrines the commandments of men,” we read in the 1838/39 account (Joseph Smith-History 1:19). In the Wentworth Letter in 1842, Joseph similarly declared that the two glorious personages who appeared before him told him that “all the religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom.” The early tracts by Orson Pratt in 1840 and by Orson Hyde in 1842 similarly emphasize that “all the religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines” and that “all of them erred in doctrine.”

Third, confusion, contention, and corruption had ensued in the lives of many who professed to be followers of Christ. This was the culminating and precipitating final blow. It is one thing for people to disagree using civility and kindness while pondering various inscrutable mysteries of divine truth. It is another thing for chaos and conflict to reign. At the age of twelve, Joseph was pierced to the soul by “the contentions and divi[si]ons the wicke[d]ness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the minds of mankind.” In 1835 he similarly spoke of “being wrought up in my mind, respecting the subject of religion and looking at the different systems taught the children of men.” Being torn by the “tumult. . . so great and incessant,” as various professors of religion “used all the powers of both reason and sophistry to prove their errors, or, at least to make the people think they were in error” (Joseph Smith-History 1:9), Joseph turned to the Lord for mercy and help. He was told that “those professors were all corrupt; that: ‘they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me’” (Joseph Smith-History 1:19).

Significantly, the historical record confirms this three-stage picture quite readily and thoroughly. Although it would require several volumes to examine and explore all of the questions posed above, this paper proposes to outline in broad strokes these three stages of creedal apostasy as brought to light in the First Vision accounts. From this three-stage overview, one may see how the emergence and

evolution of these numerous creeds can be used to gauge the ascendancy and extent of the great Apostasy. Whether the adoption of these formal creeds should be seen primarily as a cause or as a mere symptom of apostasy is hard to say, but looking back on this quite staggering historical development from our vantage point today leaves little doubt that the crisis of the creeds had gone far enough by 1820 that the Lord's voice should be raised in disapproval and warning against it.

New Testament Pre-Creedal Statements

Starting with the time of the New Testament, it is evident that original Christian declarations of faith began as genuinely simple statements of testimony. Several declarations of belief are found in the New Testament. Some of these actually begin with the words "we believe" (John 6:69) or "I believe" (Acts 8:37), words that the Latin Vulgate renders respectively as "credidimus" and "credo," from which Latin word the English term *creed* directly derives. Hence the basic idea of a creedal declaration of faith can be traced to these "pre-creedal" statements in the Bible. Interestingly and appropriately, these biblical statements are notably characterized by their spontaneous individuality and their succinct focus on testifying of the Saviors divine roles and powers. But ironically, and as so often happened in the Apostasy, seeds that were divine and good at the outset were corrupted and transformed into something far beyond what they were originally intended to be. In the case of the creeds, these biblical expressions of testimony may well have formed the root from which the later creeds would grow, but only after many wild branches had been grafted into this faithful stalk of believing declaration.

Pre-creedal statements of belief in the New Testament are short, varied, unrehearsed, and intensely personal. Consider three representative cases from the words of Nathanael, Peter, and Paul.

Nathanael is the first reported disciple to verbally declare his inward recognition that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God. Nathanael, who was taken by Philip to see "him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write," was greeted by Jesus, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" When Jesus said that he had seen Nathanael under the fig tree, this disciple broke forth in immediate testimony, "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel" (John 1:45–49). No one had told Nathanael what to say; his declaration is pure and unformulaic. Nor is there any compelling reason to believe that it was not historical, for what Christian community—Johannine or otherwise—would have called Jesus "Rabbi" or "the King of Israel" as a matter of institutional confession

from which Nathanael's statement could otherwise have been derived? Nathanael's short statement fits especially into the Galilean context of Jesus' earliest ministry.

Peter's bold statements of belief in Jesus as the Christ are reported with flexibility in the four Gospels. In Mark, Peter's response to the question, "Whom do men say that I am?" is simple and matter-of-fact: "Thou art the Christ" *(su ei ho Christos,* Mark 8:29). In Luke, the answer is slightly longer: "The Christ of God" *(ton Christon tou theou,* Luke 9:20). In Matthew, the words *Son* and *living* are added to the expressions reported in Mark and Luke: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" *(su ei ho Christos ho huios tou theou tou zóntos,* Matthew 16:16). Finally, in John, following the Bread of Life Sermon, Peter responds to the question, "Will ye also go away?" by saying, "We believe and are sure [that is, 'we have come to know,' *egnókamen]* that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God" (John 6:69). The earliest New Testament manuscripts actually present Peter's terminology here in varying terms, confessing Christ to be the following:

"The holy one of God" *(ho hagios tou theou,* Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and other early manuscripts)

"The Christ the holy one of God" (Coptic)

"The Son of God" (Old Italian, Syriac)

"The Christ, the Son of God" (family 1, Vulgate)

"The Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16; family 13, Byzantine)

From this variance, one may conclude with confidence that rigidity was not the expected rule among the early Christians when it came to bearing personal testimony of Jesus Christ, although common key elements clearly run throughout these declarations.

Finally, among the New Testament writers, it was Paul who took the further step of articulating several specific dimensions or factors in the divinity of Jesus Christ—elements that in time would become staples in later, more elaborate creedal formulations. In his letter to Timothy, Paul called the following lyrical statement, confessedly *(homologoumenos),* the great mystery of worship—namely that "he *(hos)* or God *(theos)* was manifest in the flesh, justified in the spirit, seen of angels, preached in the nations, believed in the world, received in glory" (1 Timothy 3:16; authors translation).

On another occasion, writing to the Colossians, Paul declared, “All things were created by him, and for him. And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself” (Colossians 1:16–20).

In these two confessions of faith, Paul encapsulates the main elements of his Christology: namely Jesus’ incarnation (at birth), confirmation by the Spirit (at baptism), visitation by angels (at the Transfiguration), proclamation (by His Apostles), reception (by faithful followers), and exaltation (at the Ascension), together with His roles in creation, revelation, resurrection, perfection, crucifixion, and atoning reconciliation. Although Paul waxes eloquently expansive, his words in these statements remain in the sphere of personal expression. Nevertheless, it was the historical and theological assertions of these words and phrases that would eventually become key components of the Christian creeds.

The Early Christian Creeds

As time progressed, the early Christian leaders and councils adopted creed after creed, slowly adding points of deviating doctrine until eventually a considerable number of odd and incorrect doctrines had been intermingled with the originally valid and truthful elements. Beginning around A.D. 200, Christians began to espouse and require of each other adherence to particular creeds, demonstrating and propagating their belief in Jesus Christ. Such creeds seemed needful because many people were teaching a wide range of doctrines about Jesus. Indeed, some of these heretical groups were way off the mark. Creeds functioned in many ways that, taken at face value, must have seemed salutary: They could serve as baptismal interview questions to be asked of an initiate before baptism; they could also serve as catechisms to prepare converts for baptism, as general guidelines for personal belief, as expressions of testimony, as collective declarations of belief, and as the texts for unifying speech acts that bound congregations together. At first, the main purpose of these creeds seems to have been more a matter of self-definition and admission, rather than anathematization or exclusion. Early Christians were mostly interested in encouraging and allowing people to join the church, and accordingly the variety and informality of the earliest creeds manifests little interest in imposing uniformity on all believers or in making exclusive truth claims that one formulation was orthodox and any other was heterodox.

But as these statements developed, the tendencies of creedal formulations went too far in the direction of definitive absolutism, taking away the liberty of the pure and simple spirit that had prevailed in the apostolic era (as seen above) and prescribing and imposing extensive definitions and boundaries on the faithful. Especially when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the permissive and admitting roles of creedal statements became less relevant: Joining the church was taken for granted. Thus, the church changed its emphasis to regulating the internal affairs of the church and formulating rules that could be used to require consistency of belief among all members. As the following discussion demonstrates, this trajectory became increasingly extreme as time went on. What began in the second and third centuries as fairly straightforward and unproblematic declarations in the Old Roman, Apostles', and Caesarean Creeds became more and more arcane, philosophical, and delimiting as the fourth and fifth centuries played themselves out. This process of accretion, adding phrase on phrase, from creed to creed, is readily visible on the accompanying chart.

In the left-hand column, one of the earliest Christian creeds is given. It is brief and, for the most part, unproblematic. No one would object to its succinct opening statement in the Old Roman form of the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ his only begotten Son our Lord." One might wonder, however, about that creed's insertion of belief in "the holy Church." Understood in a proper sense as a declaration of authority to act in the name of God, this element is acceptable to Latter-day Saints; but as a claim that the Church itself is somehow holy or perfect or infallible, it would begin to raise concerns.

As we move to the right across the columns, we see elements in the creeds becoming observably more complicated. To the third-century declaration "I believe in God the Father Almighty" was added "Maker of heaven and earth," which then became in the early fourth-century "Maker of all things visible and invisible," which then evolved a few years later into "Ruler and Creator of all ages and creatures." As well intended as these embellishments might have been, they introduce unnecessary claims or descriptions that lay themselves open to error. For example, should the creed declare that God the Father is the Creator, or should that role be attributed to the Son (as in John 1:1–3 and Colossians 1:16)? The fourth-century Caesarean statement, along with the Nicene Creed, attempted to recognize both of these members of the Godhead as creators ("Jesus Christ . . . by whom *also* all things were made" or simply "by whom all things were made"), but this alternative was not embraced in the fifth-century Symbol of Chalcedon, by

which time the inseparability of the Father and Son had come to prevail. Or again, what does it mean to create all things “visible and invisible”? What do these words add to the statement that God created “all things”? And how is the word *create* to be understood here? Why limit the declaration, tautologically, as in the Old Italian form of the Apostles’ Creed, to being the “creator” of all “creatures”? One can easily see how the creeds would have been better off leaving such elements unstated rather than making such statements that would inevitably run the risk of being misunderstood or of being wrong.

Most controversial were the increasing attempts of the creeds to define the divine nature of Jesus Christ and His relationship to the Father. In the early years, it was sufficient to recognize Jesus Christ as the “only begotten Son.” As time went on, elaborations moved from “Word of God, God of God, Light of Light” in the Caesarean formulation, to “Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance [essence] with the Father” in the Nicene Creed, to “consubstantial [coessential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; . . . in two natures, inconfusedly; unchangeably, indivisibly,” as it is stated in the Symbol of Chalcedon. While it may be true that the Nicene Creed served an important purpose by defending the eternal divinity of Jesus Christ against the Arian doctrine that Jesus Himself was created ex nihilo by the Father, it may also be true that the Nicene cure was as bad as the ailment, for neither Arius nor Athanasius seems to have understood the premortal existence of any of God’s children, let alone that of His Firstborn Son.

Even more problematic, arcane, and obscure is the so-called Athanasian Creed, in the far right column of the chart. It was never adopted by any council and therefore is not truly a creed with any official status; indeed, it is of unknown authorship, but it probably dates to the seventh or eighth century. Even as an unofficial statement, it demonstrates how far things had progressed by that time in drafting statements of belief that were more statements of what one cannot comprehend than they were statements of what one can believe and testify of. If not erroneous, many of its declarations at least seem confusing and unscriptural, although intermingled with truth, such as the belief that “at [Christ’s] coming all men shall rise again with their bodies; and shall give account for their own works.”

My purpose in comparing these representative versions of early Christian creeds is not to attempt anything like a comprehensive discussion of the complex histories, philosophical debates, and ecclesiastical struggles that stand behind each of the formulations. That information can be readily found in several excellent and extensive studies of the early Christian creeds. My purpose is simply to point out

that the expansion of the creeds moved away from the simple declarations of faith that prevailed in first-century Christianity and that in that development one can clearly see increasing evidences of the incremental progression of the Apostasy. Latter-day Saints should not condemn all creeds equally, for all creeds were not created equal. Yet even the early creeds began to sow seeds that would in time spawn more debilitating problems. By the end of the ancient era, one may see in the creeds that the Apostasy was indeed in full array, harboring doctrinal problems and errors, sometimes as much by what they did not say as by what they did say.

The Protestant Creeds

For many centuries, the work of the councils that produced these main creeds or symbols firmly remained within the unified realm of the “universal,” or “catholic,” church. Indeed, the main purpose of these early creeds was to create (or impose) uniformity of belief according to these standards of orthodoxy. But, inevitably, such superimposed uniformity would lead to protest and conflict, and with the Protestant Reformation, creeds reached the third, even more problematic stage.

Creeds now became statements of belief, formulated for the purpose of distinguishing and differentiating one religious group from another. Into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the number of creeds climbed and the verbosity and complexity of these confessions soared. While all of this positioning may have been understandably necessitated by the political and rational forces that surrounded the various Protestant denominations or sects, the result was precisely as Joseph’s experience depicts. Confusion, dissension, and self-serving manipulation characterized much of the religious fervor of his day, erupting in many cases (not only against the Mormons) in hostility, persecution, and violence.

By 1820, numerous creeds of various denominations had been brought into existence. The main Protestant creeds are collected and translated conveniently in the works of Philip Schaff and of Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss. Chronologically listed here, along with a few Eastern and Catholic creeds, these formulations include the following :

Synodical Tome (Eastern, 1341)

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Confession of Faith (Mark of Ephesus, 1439)

Confession of Faith (Gennadius II of Constantinople, 1455–56)

The Sixty-Seven Articles of Ulrich Zwingli (1523)

The Schleitheim Confession (1527)

The Ten Theses of Berne (1528)

Luther’s Catechism (1529)

The Marburg Articles (1529)

The Augsburg Confession (1530)

The Tetrapolitan Confession (1530)

A Reckoning of the Faith (Zwingli, 1530)

The First Confession of Basel (1534)

The Wittenberg Concord (1536)

The Lausanne Articles (1536)

The Ten Articles (1536)

The Geneva Confession (1536)

The First Helvetic Confession (1536)

The Geneva Catechism (1541/1542)

Dogmatic Decrees of the Council of Trent (Catholic, 1545–63)

The Zurich Agreement (Consensus Tigurinus, 1549)

The Anglican Catechism (1549)

The Gallican Confession (1559)

The First Scotch Confession (1560)

The Belgic Confession (1561)

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)

The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1563)

The Tridentine Profession of Faith (Catholic, 1564)

The Second Helvetic Confession (1566)

The Catechesis and Confession of Faith of the Polish

Brethren (1574) The Formula of Concord (1576)

The Reply to the Augsburg Confession (Ecumenical Patriarch

Jeremias II, 1576)

The Transylvanian Confession of Faith (1579)

The King’s Confession (1581)

The Second Scotch Confession (1581)

The Concept of Cologne (1591)

The Saxon Visitation Articles (1592)

The Lambeth Articles (1595)

A True Confession (English Separatists [Brownists], 1596)

The Arminian Articles (1610)

The Short Confession of Faith (1610)

The Irish Articles (1615)

The Canons of the Synod of Dort (1619)

Confession of Faith (Metrophanes Critopoulos, 1625)

The Eastern Confession of the Christian Faith (Cyril Lucar, 1629)

The Dordrecht Confession (1632)

The Orthodox Confession of the Eastern Church (1643)

The London Baptist Confession (1644)

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)

The Cambridge Platform (Congregationalists of New England, 1648)

The Faith and Practice of Thirty Congregations Gathered According to the Primitive Pattern (General Baptists, 1651)

The Confession of Waldennes (Presbyterian, 1655)

The Savoy Declaration (Congregationalist, 1658)

The Anglican Catechism, Revised (1662)

The Eighteen Decrees of the Synod of Jerusalem (Eastern, 1672)

The Confession of the Society of Friends (Quakers, 1675)

The Philadelphia Confession (Baptist, 1688)

The Easter Litany of the Moravian Church (1749)

Mennonite Articles of Faith by Cornelis Ris (1766)

The Methodist Articles of Religion (1784)

A Concise Statement of the Principles of the Only True Church (Shakers, 1790)

The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, American Revision (1801)

The Winchester Profession (Universalist Church, 1803)

Propositions from Declaration and Address (Thomas Campbell, 1809)

During Joseph Smiths lifetime, other creeds and confessions continued to be promulgated, especially in America. These included the following:

The Confession of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (American, 1829)

The Declaration of the Congregational Union of England and Wales (1833)

The New Hampshire Confession (American, 1833)

The Auburn Declaration (Presbyterian, American, 1837)

One of the most salient features of these creeds is their length. They tended to be very long. The Belgic Confession of Faith, a Calvinist creed, runs about 9,000 words; the Westminster Confession of Faith contains approximately 12,500 words.

The other creeds of that period all have thousands of words and numerous articles. The Calvinist Canons of the Synod of Dort, for example, has fifty-nine articles; the London Baptist Confession has fifty-three; the Belgic Confession, thirty-seven.

Another prominent feature of these creeds is their polemic stance. As important as saying what one believed was also saying what one did not believe and how the tenets of one denomination differed from those of another group. The Baptist Confession of 1688, for example, which is the most generally accepted Baptist confession in England and in the southern states in America, says the following about Catholicism: “The Lord Jesus Christ is the head of the Church; . . . neither can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof, but is no other than Antichrist, that man of sin and son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the Church against Christ, and all that is called God: whom the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of his coming.” The Scotch Confession of Faith (1560), in Article 22, targets the “Papistical kirk [church],” or community of Catholics, as being false priests and criticizes specific practices and beliefs: “They have so adulterated both the one sacrament and the other with their own inventions, that no part of Christ’s action abides in the original purity: for oil, salt, spittle, and suchlike in baptism, are but men’s inventions. Adoration, veneration, bearing through streets and towns, and keeping of bread in boxes or buists *[chests],* are profanation of Christ’s sacraments, and no use of the same.” Other creeds go out of their way to deal bluntly with what they consider to be specific heretical doctrines from Christian history. The Latter-day Saint Articles of Faith offer a much more conciliatory tone, “let them worship how, where, or what they may” (Articles of Faith 1:11).

The combative nature of the Protestant creeds is also evident by their dates. Many of these confessions coincide with the dates of Henry VIII and his schism from Rome, the Thirty Years’ War in Europe (1618–48), the Cromwellian Revolution (1640–60), as well as the tumultuous times of the First and Second Awakenings in the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Perhaps it was most of all in reference to these bloody battles, divisive contentions, and coercive tactics that the creeds of Christianity merited the term *abomination* in the words of the 1838/39 account of the First Vision. That word, of course, is offensive and jarring to our friends of other faiths. And indeed, it was a very strong word in the vocabulary of Joseph Smith’s America. Webster’s 1828 *Dictionary of the American Language* defines *abomination* as “1. extreme hatred; detestation. 2. The object of detestation, . . . 3. Hence, defilement, pollution, in a physical sense, or evil doctrines and practices, which are moral defilements.” Nevertheless, an *abomination* in the biblical sense can include anything that takes a person away

from God or His righteousness. Obviously, the Bible uses the word *abomination* in connection with a wide range of sin or transgression, including idolatry (Deuteronomy 27:15), male homosexual conduct (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13), human sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:31), eating ritually unclean animals (Leviticus 11:10–12; Deuteronomy 14:3–8), witchcraft and divination (Deuteronomy 18:9–14), and dishonest business dealings (Deuteronomy 25:13–16). Proverbs 6:17–19 gives a list of seven things that are an abomination unto God: "a proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, an heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren." Thus, seeing the creeds as an abomination may readily be conflated with the problems that they had caused, as identified in the First Vision accounts, namely, turning people aside from the gospel, teaching incorrect doctrines of men, professing errors and corruptions, and inciting tumult.

Latter-day Saints typically hasten to say that the Articles of Faith, drawn from Joseph Smith's 1842 Wentworth Letter and canonized as an addition to the Pearl of Great Price at the Church's jubilee in 1880, do not constitute a creed: "Authoritative statements found in LDS literature are not viewed as elements in a creed. For example, although its thirteen Articles of Faith are scriptural, they are open-ended." "They are not a creed in the traditional Christian sense. . . . Although not a formal creed, the Articles of Faith are a marvelously abridged summary (less than 400 words) of the basic beliefs of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." Nevertheless, the main topics covered in the Articles of Faith are commonly covered in most of these other confessions, although each expresses a considerably different point of view. Those topics typically include the nature of the Godhead, the fall of Adam and original sin, human responsibility, the atonement of Jesus Christ, baptism, communion through faith and repentance, belief in the Bible, and the empowerment of civil government to enforce orthodoxy. Rarely, however, will these confessions address the question of qualification for the ministry and liberty of individual conscience insofar as the individual is making a good faith effort to follow Christian truths. Absent from the typical traditional creed is virtually any mention of the numerous gifts of the Spirit (perhaps because Pentecostal spiritualism is by nature basically antithetical to rational verbal constraints), the Second Coming and the Millennium, the future restoration of the house of Israel, or, of course, a belief in the Book of Mormon as the word of God. These similarities and differences notwithstanding, the major problems caused by the traditional creeds are decisively nowhere visible in the Articles of Faith: those thirteen statements are short, clear, and simply declarative. They are also preventatively and generatively open ended: the inclusive words *all* or *and so forth*

appear in Articles of Faith 3, 6, 7, 9, and 13, most expansively in the assertion “We believe all that God has revealed, [and] all that He does now reveal” (Articles of Faith 1:9).

Summary

This brief look at the creeds of Christianity has accomplished the following purposes:

First, we have seen that the accounts of the First Vision identify several problems raised by or in conjunction with the creeds. No specific malady was exclusively singled out.

Second, the problems were as much involved with content as with conflict. The concern was with not just what the creeds said but how they were used.

Third, a three-stage development from the New Testament to the early Christian creeds to the Protestant confessions is clearly visible. The loss of important truths of the gospel, of key covenants, and of plain and precious parts of the scriptures may well have happened in that order at a very early stage in Christian history (1 Nephi 13:26–28), but the profound effects of the Apostasy was not felt all at once but continued incrementally for years to come.

Fourth, the earliest Christian creeds were not as bad as one might have thought. In the first few centuries, Christian statements of belief remained largely unobjectionable from a Latter-day Saint point of view.

Fifth, as the centuries went on, the errors and complexities increased and predominated over the original seeds planted by the Lord and His Apostles. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, numerous creeds were in existence. Many of them were extremely long, elaborate, controlling, and defining.

Sixth, with so many creeds in existence, it is unlikely that the Lord had any particular creed in mind when he spoke of them and their adherents as abominations of corruption. Thus, Latter-day Saints should not take issue so much with any single creed as with the whole concatenation of creedal formulations in general.

Joseph Smith, of course, was neither the first nor the last to raise objections to these problematic developments. There is a bold tradition of theological objectors who have spoken out from time to time against the creeds, fighting vigorously

against the rising and raging tide of creedalism, and among whom may be counted such luminaries as John Milton, John Locke, John Taylor, Richard Price, John Simson, Francis Hutcheson, and others, who were openly branded as heretics. The history of these critics is engagingly reported by R. G. Crawford in the 1976 *Scottish Journal of Theology.* But in the minds of most of these critics, the objection to creeds was based on the sufficiency of the Bible: “The Bible is the only religion of Protestants.” These objectors may have diagnosed the problem, but they prescribed the wrong cure. Closing the lid tighter on Christianity would not remove the lid that the creeds have imposed. Only the restoration of the keys of continuing revelation could open the heavens and make the church a “living church” with which the Lord can be “well pleased” (D&C 1:30).

Old Roman and African Form of the Apostles’ Creed *(2d or 3d century)*	***The Apostles’ Creed*** *(2d or 3d century)*	***The Caesarean Creed*** *according to Eusebius (A.D. 325)*	***An Old Italian Form of the Apostles’ Creed*** *(ca. A.D. 350)*
I believe in God the Father Almighty.	I believe in God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth.	We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible;	We believe in God the Father Almighty, Ruler and Creator of all ages and creatures.
And in Jesus Christ his only begotten Son our Lord, who	And in Jesus Christ his only [begotten] Son our Lord;	And in one Lord Jesus Christ,	And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;
		the Word of God, God of God, Light of Light, Life of Life, the only-begotten Son, the firstborn of every creature, begotten of God the Father before all ages, by whom also all things were made; who for our salvation was made flesh and made his home among men;	

who was born of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary; crucified under Pontius Pilate, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead;	who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose from the dead;	and suffered; and rose on the third day;	who was born of the Holy Ghost and from the Virgin Mary; who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and buried; on the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of the Father;	he ascended into heaven; and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;	and ascended to the Father;	ascended into the heavens; sitteth on the right hand of God the Father;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.	from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.	and will come again in glory, to judge the quick and the dead.	from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
And in the Holy Ghost;	I believe in the Holy Ghost;	We believe also in one Holy Ghost.	And in the Holy Ghost;
the holy Church;	the holy Catholic Church; the communion of saints;		and the holy Catholic Church;
the forgiveness of sins;	the forgiveness of sins;		the remission of sins;
the resurrection of the body; [the life everlasting].	the resurrection of the body [flesh]; and the life everlasting. Amen.		the resurrection of the flesh.

The Nicene Creed *(as received from the Protestant churches) (A.D. 325/-381)*

The Symbol of Chalcedon *(A.D. 451)*

The Athanasian Creed *(date uncertain, ca. 7th century)*

I believe in one God the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God,
begotten of the Father before all worlds [God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance [essence] with the Father; by whom all things were made; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man;
and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried; and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures;
and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;
and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.
And [I believe] in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spake by the Prophets.
And [I believe] one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.
I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;
and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [coessential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation,
born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood;
one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly; unchangeably, indi-visibly, inseparably, the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess: that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man;
God, of the Substance [Essence] of the Father: begotten before the worlds and Man, of the Substance [Essence] of his Mother, born in the world.
Perfect God: and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.
Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead: and inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood.
Who although he be God and Man; yet he is not two, but one Christ.
One; not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh: but by taking [assumption] of the Manhood into God.
One altogether; not by confusion of Substance [Essence]: but by unity of Person.
For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man: so God and Man is one Christ;
Who suffered for our salvation: descended into hell: rose again the third day from the dead.
He ascended into heaven, he sitteth on the right hand of the Father God Almighty.
From whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies;
and shall give account for their own works.
And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire.
This is the Catholic Faith; which except a man believe faithfully [truly and firmly], he can not be saved.

Notes

Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith,* sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 327.

Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* 5 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), s.v. “Creeds.” See also Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine,* 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 170–72.

Compared and analyzed in John W. Welch, “Modern Revelation: A Guide to Research about the Apostasy” (forthcoming from the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], Provo, Utah).

Joseph Smith, *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Autobiographical and Historical Writings,* ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:6–7; first published in Dean C. Jessee, “The Early Accounts of Joseph Smiths First Vision,” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 275–96.

Levi Richards Journal, June 11, 1843, Church Archives.

Smith, *Papers of Joseph Smith,* 1:461.

Smith, *Papers of Joseph Smith,* 1:430.

Orson Pratt, “A Interesting Account,” in *Papers of Joseph Smith,* 1:391.

Orson Hyde (“Ein Ruf aus der Wiiste” [“A Cry from the Wilderness”], in *Papers of Joseph Smith,* 1:409) and Dan Jones *(History of the Latter-day Saints,* trans. Ronald D. Dennis [Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2002], 16) hastened to place the blame on the fact that all “believed imperfect doctrines, to a greater or a lesser degree” and to exonerate many of these believers who “were zealous, conscientious, God-fearing men, fleeing evil, and worshiping him according to the light which they had.” I appreciate James M. Reynolds for drawing my attention to this 1846 account by Dan Jones in this connection.

Smith, *Papers of Joseph Smith,* 1:5.

Joseph Smith, *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Journal, 1832–42,* ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 2:68–69.

Of course, it is possible that when Jesus said that “all their creeds are an

abomination," he was not using the word "creeds" in a formal sense, but rather simply in reference to "any system of principles which are believed or professed," for the word *creed* had this meaning, as well as the formal meaning, in the American language in 1828, according to Webster's *Dictionary of the American Language.* I do not exclude this meaning, but neither do I think that this meaning should preclude the formal meaning. The following discussion outlines the development of the creedal crisis by looking at the official creeds, because they are indicative of the broader problems inherent in the belief systems they summarize and because they offer the best evidence of the main phenomena.

Several other biblical passages may reflect creedal declarations, including Deuteronomy 6:4; 1 Kings 18:39; John 20:28; Acts 8:37–38; 16:31; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Philippians 2:6–11; and 1 John 4:2. See also J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, 1972), chapter 1, "Credal Elements in the New Testament."

For an excellent discussion of the positive features and helpful contributions of the early Christian Creeds, see Bijhan Nasser-Faili, "Early Christian Creeds and LDS Doctrine," *Journal of Latter Day Saint History* 12 (2000): 12–23; this article discusses the relationship between the Arian Controversy and the Nicene Creed on pages 16–17.

See, for example, Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1931); Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds;* Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), introductory volume to Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003).

Such hostility and violence are graphically displayed and described in James H. Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1998), chapters 1 and 2.

These lists are a selection of creeds included in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom,* and in Peliken and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions in the Christian Tradition.*

Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom,* 738–39.

Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom,* 471; spelling and capitalization modernized.

Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York:

Converse, 1828), s.v. “Abomination.”

“Creeds,” in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* 1:343.

David J. Whittaker, “Articles of Faith,” in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* 1:67, 69; see also John W Welch and David J. Whittaker, “‘We Believe. . . . ’ : Development of the Articles of Faith,” *Ensign,* September 1979, 51–55.

See Scotch Confession of Faith, Article 22, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom,* 471.

See Savoy Declaration, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom,* 720.

R. G. Crawford, “The Revolt against Creeds and Confessions of Faith,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 29 (1976): 13–25.

This statement is attributed to Chillingworth (Crawford, “Revolt against Creeds,” 13).

Likewise, the recent attempt by popular Catholic theologian Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), is well worth reading, but ultimately it is a disappointing attempt to push Christians harder to use and study “the creed.” While Johnson explains much about the origins and meanings of the words in one version of the creed, he leaves us to wonder which creed is right and why the use of it in the twenty-first century would actually have a more salutary effect than the questionable use of creeds has had over the past millennium and a half.

Original Link:
https://rsc.byu.edu/prelude-restoration/all-their-creeds-were-abomination